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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

GUATEMALA ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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No. 0787/66

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
4 March 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

Guatemala on the Eve of Elections

A. The Situation:

On Sunday 6 March about 700,000 Guatemalans will go to the polls to elect a president and a congress. The three legally inscribed political parties (see annex) have candidates for these offices. With the balloting just three days away, large segments of the population are indifferent to the outcome.

B. The Problem

1. The candidate favored by the Peralta government, Juan de Dios Aguilar, the nominee of the Democratic Institutional Party (PID), may suffer from charges that he was "imposed" by the regime and that he has been aided by clandestine use of government resources. An Aguilar victory would be certain to be challenged on the grounds of fraud and coercion.

2. The Rightist National Liberation Movement (MLN) has campaigned on the premise that it is best able to cope with the problem of Communist insurgency and that a vote for its candidate, Colonel Miguel Angel Ponciano, is a vote against Communism. By implication, the MLN had advertised that a vote for Julio Cesar Mendez of the Revolutionary Party (PR) is a vote for Communism. The PR, the only left-of-center party in the race, represents the only hope of the left, which has long been excluded from power and is a threat to the entrenched right.

3. On the whole the campaign has given little cause for optimism that any of the parties can solve Guatemala's more serious social and economic problems. There is a distinct threat that the election of any

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of the candidates will not ensure stability. None has held elective office or is well known to the Guatemalan people. Each is unacceptable, personally or ideologically, to at least one important segment of society. Furthermore, none has demonstrated leadership potential or the promise of being able to fashion more than a fragile administration.

4. The government-backed Democratic Institutional Party (PID) has benefited from government funds and the use of its services, such as vehicles and the national printing shop. Pro-PID officials have been appointed in outlying districts with the hope of being able to exert sufficient pressure to make the locals vote for the party. Government employees can be expected to vote for the party also. Even at this time, the opposition conservative National Liberation Movement (MLN), and the left-of-center Revolutionary Party (PR) have charged that farmers and others in outlying districts and villages have already cast their votes for the PID. We have no evidence to support such charges, however.

5. If any candidate achieves a majority during the general elections, in all probability it will be the PID's Juan de Dios Aguilar.

6. Fraudulent elections would be no surprise. Mendez of the PR recently has professed that if the fraud is not obvious he will abide by the results. Ponciano of the MLN probably will also. Should the fraud be blatant, however, their followers--at least those of the PR--will probably go into the streets.

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7. There is a strong possibility that none of the three candidates will receive an absolute majority in the general election. This will make the congress --when it meets on 5 May--the final arbiter between the top two candidates. Elections for the congress therefore have gained in importance. This is especially true for the MLN. The PID and PR are expected to elect the most deputies. However, the MLN will be in

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a position to provide the swing vote necessary to elect the president and to exact a high price for that vote.

C. Political Significance

8. This election, Guatemala's first general election since 1958* has profound meaning for the nation's political future. The country would greatly benefit from a peaceful, legal transfer of power. But the parties in Guatemala are in general poorly organized and without philosophical or ideological base. Because governmental succession is more often extralegal and violent than legitimate and calm, there has been little inspiration for constructing sound political organizations.

9. A basic problem over the past 20 years has been the bitterness and estrangement of the right and the left. The social, political and economic upset suffered by conservative elements during the 1944-54 revolution has left unhealed scars and a recriminatory attitude toward liberals, who tend to be indiscriminately branded by their opponents as Communists. The left has not been able to make a successful comeback since Carlos Castillo Armas' "Liberation" of June 1954. It was, in fact, the possibility of their resurgence in elections scheduled for 1963 that led to the military coup and the present military government.

10. One of the immediate problems connected with Sunday's election is a direct legacy of this long mutual intolerance. Even though the bulk of Guatemala's left does not look on Julio Cesar Mendez and his PR as representative of its interests, his fate this Sunday is bound to be read by the left as the handwriting on the wall. His failure, whatever the reason, may confirm for the left its strong suspicion that it cannot return to power except through revolution.

*Elections of November 1957 and January 1958 were both inconclusive and President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes was chosen by congress.

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11. A military intervention to nullify a Mendez victory in the official vote count--which must be judged unlikely--would also serve to consolidate leftist support behind the PR.

12. It is the attitude of the left toward the outcome of this election that will be crucial to Guatemala's future. The PID and the MLN have the same overriding interests, i.e., maintaining the power of the conservatives, and the same fear of Communists (among whom they include the democratic left). Each should, therefore, be able to accept victory by the other. The danger inherent in the 6 March contest lies in the possible consolidation of the now divided, largely unorganized left, and in the possibly enhanced appeal of guerrilla tactics. A conciliatory, constructive attitude on the part of a conservative president-elect, unfortunately, is not likely.

D. The Period Following the Elections

13. The period between 6 March and 1 July--the date set for inauguration--will be critical for Guatemala. During this period the elections should have been certified. The Communists and other extremists will undoubtedly try to take advantage of any exploitable situation.

14. There are reports that members of the Guatemalan Communist Party will conspicuously support Mendez and the PR in order to embarrass the moderate left and lend the appearance of substance to charges that Mendez is one of their number so as to provoke the military into preventing him from taking office. Regardless of PGT actions, the Guatemalan military are unlikely to acquiesce in the inauguration of a Mendez government and could be expected to intervene to prevent it. This intervention, which could take the form of a coup by men associated with the Peralta regime, or a coup by other army officers, would provide the left--moderate and extreme--with a ready-made excuse to begin its own "revolution."

ANNEX I

Parties and Candidates Participating

Democratic Institutional Party (PID): This government-sponsored party was set up in 1964 to serve as a focal point of a broad-based coalition-type party similar to Mexico's PRI. The PID appears to have little popular backing, being made up of businessmen and white-collar government employees. Its orientation is conservative. As the official party, PID benefits from its access to government resources, patronage promises, and the traditional electoral tactics of government authorities.

Juan de Dios AGUILAR de Leon
Presidential candidate of the Government's Democratic Institutional Party (PID)

Aguilar has no discernible political orientation aside from a personal loyalty to Peralta. Reported to be an opportunist, he served the two leftist administrations of Juan Jose Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz Guzman which controlled Guatemala from 1944 to 1954, but was not personally associated with Communism or Communists. He has long professed to be pro-US and has expressed strong support for US action in the Dominican Republic.

Gustavo MIRON Porras
Vice-Presidential candidate of the Democratic Institutional Party (PID)

Miron is a prominent and influential member of Guatemala's exclusive circle of bankers and major businessmen, and was apparently selected to win the support of this strategic sector of the voting population. Reportedly an anti-Communist, he has a reputation of being an able economist who is personally honest and sincere. Miron has maintained a friendly attitude toward the United States, and the Embassy considers him the most competent among the six executive candidates.

National Liberation Movement (MLN): Formed as a split from the old Castillo Armas' National Democratic Movement (MDN), the MLN is right-wing conservative, firmly anti-Communist, violently anti-Arévalo,

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and strongly opposed to parties of the left in general. The MLN presidential candidate is bitterly antagonistic toward the PID and its candidate, and prefers cooperation in the legislature with the PR. The MLN organization, however, will probably align more readily with fellow conservatives in the PID.

Miguel Angel PONCIANO Samayoa
Presidential candidate of the rightist National
Liberation Movement (MLN)

Col. Ponciano resigned as chief of staff of the armed forces and from active duty in the army on 2 August 1965 to run for president. He had hoped to be chosen as the government party's candidate, but chief of government Peralta denied him that mantle. Since then, he has reportedly been very bitter toward Peralta and Aguilar. A vigorous, capable man who maintains a high moral standard, Ponciano is openly anti-Communist and is believed to be friendly toward the United States.

Manuel VILLACORTA Vielman
Vice-presidential candidate of the National Liberation Movement (MLN)

Villacorta has been urging a return to constitutionality for the past two years. He characterizes himself as a member of the moderate left, but has been described as intensely ambitious, opportunistic, and not very sincere.

Revolutionary Party (PR): A liberal, reformist, mildly nationalistic party, formed in 1957, the PR has been the most active and probably the most powerful political force in the country. From the 1958 expulsion of extreme leftists from the party until his death in October 1965, its leader, Mario Mendez, held the personal loyalty of the other party leaders and members. Mendez' brother, Julio Cesar, claims to share Mario's anti-Communist, reformist views, but he is a political newcomer whose strength against the extremist penetration of his party is of concern to many.

Julio Cesar MENDEZ Montenegro
Presidential candidate of the Revolutionary Party (PR)

Mendez is a brilliant and articulate lawyer, but a political unknown who is considered by some to

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be politically naive and hence easy prey for leftists and Communists. He professes to be pro-US and strongly anti-Communist.

Clemente MARROQUIN Rojas
Vice-presidential candidate of the Revolutionary
Party (PR)

Marroquin has for a number of years been producing vitriolic editorial comment in La Hora, the Guatemalan newspaper which he directs. He is a devout Catholic and a militant anti-Communist, but a bitter critic of the US and of its aid as degrading and demoralizing to Guatemala.

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